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AUSTRALIANS' LITERACY SKILLS: HOW DO THEY RATE INTERNATIONALLY?

The 1997 edition of Year Book Australia presented new information about Australians' literacy skills. This article continues that theme, but this time the emphasis is on comparing aspects of Australians' literacy skills with those of people in selected other countries. Depending on the topic under consideration, information is presented for persons aged 15-65, or for those aged 25-65. These are age groups for which comparable data are readily available from the publication Literacy Skills for the Knowledge Society, published in 1997 by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and Human Resources Development Canada. This source is gratefully acknowledged.

THE INTERNATIONAL ADULT LITERACY SURVEY

The Survey of Aspects of Literacy (SAL), conducted in Australia in 1996, was part of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) which is being coordinated by the OECD and Statistics Canada. This project involves many countries undertaking similar surveys over a period of several years, and is yielding internationally comparable data.

The 'literacy and numeracy skills' covered in the IALS were 'the information processing skills necessary to use printed material found at work, at home, and in the community'. The survey focused on 'functional literacy and numeracy' - those skills necessary to understand and use information from printed material found in everyday life. The survey objectively assessed three types of literacy:

- Prose literacy: the ability to understand and use information from various kinds of prose texts, including texts from newspapers, magazines and brochures.
- Document literacy: the ability to locate and use information contained in materials such as tables, schedules, charts, graphs and maps.
- Quantitative literacy: the ability to perform arithmetic operations using numbers contained in printed texts or documents.

Consistent with international practice, these are also referred to as the prose, document and quantitative scales. For each of these three scales, literacy skill levels were assessed on a continuum ranging from Level 1 (very poor skills) through to Level 5 (very good skills). Because Level 5 is a comparatively small group, Levels 4 and 5 are combined in most instances.

International comparisons: an overview

Table 10.18 compares the literacy skills of Australians aged 15-65 with those of people in six other countries, in terms of prose, document and quantitative literacy skills.

10.18 LITERACY SKILLS OF AUSTRALIANS AGED 15-65 COMPARED WITH THOSE OF

PEOPLE IN SIX OTHER COUNTRIES

	Level 1 %	Level 2 %	Level 3 %	Level 4/5 %
PROSE SCALE				
Australia	17.0	27.1	36.9	18.9
Canada	16.6	25.6	35.1	22.7
Germany	14.4	34.2	38.0	13.4
New Zealand	18.4	27.3	35.0	19.2
Sweden	7.5	20.3	39.7	32.4
United Kingdom	21.8	30.3	31.3	16.6
USA	20.7	25.9	32.4	21.1
DOCUMENT SCALE				
Australia	17.0	27.8	37.7	17.4
Canada	18.2	24.7	32.1	25.1
Germany	9.0	32.7	39.5	18.9
New Zealand	21.4	29.2	31.9	17.6
Sweden	6.2	18.9	39.4	35.5
United Kingdom	23.3	27.1	30.5	19.1
USA	23.7	25.9	31.4	19.0
QUANTITATIVE SCALE				
Australia	16.8	26.5	37.7	19.1
Canada	16.9	26.1	34.8	22.2
Germany	6.7	26.6	43.2	23.5
New Zealand	20.4	28.9	33.4	17.2
Sweden	6.6	18.6	39.0	35.8
United Kingdom	23.2	27.8	30.4	18.6
USA	21.0	25.3	31.3	22.5

Source: OECD and Human Resources Development Canada.

Unlike some other countries, such as Germany, Australia has basically the same distribution on

each of the three scales. The overall pattern of Australians' literacy skills is similar to that of Canada and New Zealand, especially on the prose scale. Compared to some countries, the Australian distribution is less 'extreme' - for example, on the prose scale, 64% of people have skills at Level 2 and Level 3, whereas in the USA the equivalent figure is 58%. On the document and quantitative scales, the proportion of the German and Swedish population with very poor skills is about half that of Australia.

In the remainder of this article, some of the analysis is based on the proportion of people that have reached the third of the literacy levels - this is because Level 3 is often regarded as the minimum level of competence needed to cope with the demands of everyday life and work. Two aspects are examined - the relationship between literacy and labour force participation, and between literacy and community participation.

Literacy and labour force participation

The rate of participation in the labour force (i.e. being either employed or unemployed, rather than not participating at all) by persons aged 25-65 is clearly related to literacy levels, but there is considerable variation across countries and across literacy scales - from a high of 87% of those with high literacy skills (Level 3 or better) on the quantitative scale, in Sweden and the United Kingdom, to a low of 57% of those with low skills (Levels 1 and 2) on the document scale in Germany.

In Australia, about 65% of those with low literacy skills participate in the labour force i.e. are employed or unemployed); for those with high skills the equivalent figure is about 85%. The participation rate of those with low literacy is about the same in Australia as it is in Canada and the United Kingdom; it is higher than in Germany (61% on the prose scale) but lower than in New Zealand, Sweden, and the United States (70%, 71%, and 74% respectively on the prose scale).

Of those aged 16-65 who are in the labour force, those with low literacy skills have a greater chance of being unemployed than do those who are highly skilled. In Australia, the unemployment rate for the former group (low skills) was 11.3%, more than double that of the latter - 4.6%. This magnitude of difference is the same as in other countries, with the exception of New Zealand where those with low literacy skills had an unemployment rate of 15.2%, four times that of the population with high skills.

Among persons aged 25-65 who are employed, those with higher literacy skills generally earn more than those with lower skills, but again there are differences across countries, and across literacy scales. For example, in Australia, 58% of employed persons with good/very good prose skills (Level 4/5) are in the top 60% of earners. This compares with 26% of those with very poor skills (Level 1). By contrast, in Sweden the corresponding figures are 83% and 72%, and in New Zealand they are 73% and 34%.

Literacy and community participation

Participation in voluntary community activities outside of the formal labour market is an important consideration in many societies. Across all levels of literacy, in Australia 26% of people aged 25-65 participated in some voluntary community activity at least once a month. This figure is about the same as those for Canada and Germany, greater than in the United Kingdom (19%), but less than in Sweden (47%), the USA (34%) and New Zealand (33%).

Across all of the selected countries, there is a positive relationship between literacy and voluntary community work - participation is more frequently associated with higher skills than it is with lower skills. For example, in Australia, 21% of those with low literacy skills on the prose scale participated compared to 29% of those with high skills. Of the six other countries, only two countries (Canada and the United Kingdom) had lower participation rates than did Australia

among those with low literacy skills, and two (the United Kingdom, and Germany) had lower participation by those with high skills. However, the difference in the participation rates of the two groups was relatively large in Australia compared to most other countries - only in Canada was the difference greater (14% of the low skilled compared to 30% of those with high skills).

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